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Baraga County industry looking for trained employees



CAPTION: Dan Schneider/Daily Mining Gazette

Frank Sanregret works on the first stages of assembly on a machine at Pettibone in Baraga. Skilled industrial workers are in demand in Baraga County.

By Dan Schneider, DMG Writer

BARAGA — Major employers in Baraga County have a particular interest in ongoing efforts to consolidate career and technical skills education in the county.

The Upper Peninsula Regional Industrial Manufacturing Skills Alliance (UPRIMSA) has been working to establish a program to train high school students and adults for work in industry and other skilled trades. It is a cooperative effort between educators, industry leaders and others with a stake or interest in the local economy.

Cooperation is key, according to Terex Handlers Director of Operations

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Sander Ansingh, who is involved in the the process.

"I think that is a very important aspect of ensuring that we have the work force we need in this area, trained and capable of meeting the needs we have in this industry," Ansingh said.

Employers like Terex Handlers, Pettibone and others are paying close attention because of a need to fill jobs with employees with the right skill sets.

"Mechanical understanding, mechanical aptitude, it's always a plus if you have a little knowledge in hydraulics and automotive electricals," Pettibone Vice President for Engineering Ray McDonald said. "All of those things tend to stand you up a little taller if you've got some background."

Applicants with those kinds of skills are getting harder to find locally.

"I think the well is drying up so we need to stand a little taller and look a little farther than we used to," McDonald said.

It isn't for lack of workers needing jobs.

"Baraga County has one of the highest unemployment rates of any county in the state," Joe Holman said. "Yet the companies in Baraga have been doing a lot of hiring over the last year, year and a half. They just can't find qualified people there in Baraga so we have to fundamentally change things so they are qualified."

Holman is work force development and training coordinator for Northern Michigan University. Ansingh called him "the big impetus behind this whole thing."

Holman was part of other Upper Peninsula job skills efforts such as establishing the U.P. Healthcare Roundtable, a training program for utility linemen, and regional alliance skills programs already established in the six-county central U.P. region and in Ironwood.

"As part of my job, I look all across the Upper Peninsula at what is going on in industry and we realized that companies like Terex, Pettibone, Superior Powder Coating, L'Anse Manufacturing and a whole bunch of others were facing real worker shortfalls," Holman said.

"And actually across the U.P. we're facing a worker shortfall because of retirements and expansions. We don't have enough people coming through the pipeline."

He said over the time period starting in 2005 and projecting to 2014, the U.P. is facing a shortfall of 2,500 skilled workers.

Traditional industrial jobs such as welding will remain important in Baraga.

"I know that in years past, Northern had a big program for welding training and that benefitted Pettibone greatly," McDonald said. "Not directly, but all of our subcontractors were suddenly able to get educated welders."

Ansingh said industry will advocate making innovative course work available through the training program UPRIMSA develops. One example is the teaching of lean manufacturing techniques.

"For Terex, we're very big on lean manufacturing, and we'd like to see in the future developing some curriculum in lean manufacturing," Ansingh said.

Holman said the nature of industrial jobs has changed in modern times.

"There's a misconception out there that factories nowadays are dirty and noisy," Holman said.

He said not only is that no longer the case, but industrial jobs today fit into a category Holman calls "gray collar."

"They've gone from being blue collar to gray collar, where people have to think and problem-solve on their feet," he said.

This requires more from the educational establishment.

"The high schools no longer by themselves are able to have the programs necessary to meet the employer needs, so what is happening is these kids either go somewhere else to find a job or they go to a university and they study something that forces them to be exported and it is because they weren't introduced to manufacturing in high school because those courses no longer exist," Holman said.

UPRIMSA's goal is to change that in Baraga County.

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